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Sascha Harris

*Technological University Dublin*, [sascha.harris@tudublin.ie](mailto:sascha.harris@tudublin.ie)

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# Annette von Droste-Huelshoff (1797-1848): Der Knabe im Moor (1842)

Sascha (Christian Name) H. Harris  
*Dublin Institute of Technology, [sascha.harris@dit.ie](mailto:sascha.harris@dit.ie)*



SASCHA H. HARRIS

Annette von Droste-Hülshoff (1797–1848)

*Der Knabe im Moor* (1842)

Droste-Hülshoff's best-known poem is in many ways not untypical of her main poetic stock, the traditional narrative poem or ballad. But while setting, sensation and story are quickly understood and seem easily accessible, the poet's sovereign handling of the narrator's stance and the almost effortless manipulation of the reader's emotions reveals *Der Knabe im Moor* [The Boy on the Moor] as an historically advanced – even modern – and deeply disturbing poem.

- O schaurig ist's, übers Moor zu gehn,  
Wenn es wimmelt vom Heiderauche,  
Sich wie Phantome die Dünste drehn  
Und die Ranke häkelt am Strauche,  
5 Unter jedem Tritte ein Quellchen springt,  
Wenn aus der Spalte es zischt und singt –  
O schaurig ist's, übers Moor zu gehn,  
Wenn das Röhricht knistert im Hauche!
- Fest hält die Fibel das zitternde Kind  
10 Und rennt, als ob man es jage:  
Hohl über die Fläche säuset der Wind –  
Was raschelt drüben am Hage?  
Das ist der gespenstische Gräberknecht,  
Der dem Meister die besten Torfe verzecht;  
15 Hu, hu, es bricht wie ein irres Rind!  
Hinducket das Knäblein zage.
- Vom Ufer starret Gestumpf hervor,  
Unheimlich nicket die Föhre,  
Der Knabe rennt, gespannt das Ohr,  
20 Durch Riesenhalme wie Speere;  
Und wie es rieselt und knittert darin!  
Das ist die unselige Spinnerin,  
Das ist die gebannte Spinnlenor',  
Die den Haspel dreht im Geröhre.

- 25 Voran, voran! nur immer im Lauf,  
 Voran, als woll es ihn holen!  
 Vor seinem Fuße brodelte es auf,  
 Es pfeift ihm unter den Sohlen  
 Wie eine gespenstige Melodei;  
 30 Das ist der Geigemann ungetreu,  
 Das ist der diebische Fiedler Knauf,  
 Der den Hochzeitheller gestohlen!

- Da birst das Moor, ein Seufzer geht  
 Hervor aus der klaffenden Höhle;  
 35 Weh, weh, da ruft die verdammte Margret:  
 "Ho, ho, meine arme Seele!"  
 Der Knabe springt wie ein wundes Reh;  
 Wäre nicht Schutzengel in seiner Näh,  
 Seine bleichenden Knöchelchen fände spät  
 40 Ein Gräber im Moorgeschwele.

- Da mählich gründet der Boden sich,  
 Und drüben, neben der Weide,  
 Die Lampe flimmert so heimatlich,  
 Der Knabe steht an der Scheide.  
 45 Tief atmet er auf, zum Moor zurück  
 Noch immer wirft er den scheuen Blick:  
 Ja, im Geröhre war's fürchterlich,  
 O schaurig war's in der Heide!

[How frightening it is to cross the moor when it is covered by the heathery mists, as the vapours whirl by like phantoms and the creepers crawl up through the undergrowth. Beneath each step a spring erupts, hissing and singing through the crack – How frightening it is to cross the moor when the reeds rustle in the gentle breeze!

The trembling child clutches the book tightly and runs as if hunted: across the expanse the wind blows with a hollow sound – What is that rustling over there in the hawthorn bush? It is the ghostly turf-cutter's lad stealing his master's best turf; Uh, uh, there is something running there like a mad cow! In fear the boy cowers.

Tree stumps stare out from the river bank, the sinister Scots pine nods, the boy runs, listening hard, through giant stalks shaped like spears: How it crackles and rustles in there! It is the ill-fated spinner-woman, it is the cursed spinner witch turning the reel amongst the stalks!

Onwards, onwards! Onwards as if it were out to get him! It is bubbling up before his feet, whistling a ghostly tune beneath the soles of his shoes; it is the faithless fiddler, it is the thieving fiddler Knauf who has stolen the dowry!

The moor bursts open, a sigh resounds from the gaping hole; woe, oh woe, that is damned Margaret calling all of a sudden: 'Oh, oh, bless my poor soul!' The boy

leaps like a wounded deer and, if he did not have a guardian angel by his side, his bleached bones would be found by a turf-cutter on the foggy moor.

Gradually the ground becomes firmer, and over there, alongside the meadow, a homely lamp flickers: the boy is at the edge. He takes a deep breath, and he still casts a hesitant eye back to the moor. Yes, it was terrifying amongst the reeds, oh, how frightening it was on the heath!]

A ballad is generally accessible by nature; traditionally it tells a popular, even local, story or presents a piece of folklore. Yet here, beneath the simplicity and apparent realism, is a more complex use of the plot, imagery and narration.

A boy returns home, and as he crosses the dreaded moor, the fear builds up in him as much as the reader, until with some relief he reaches solid ground, glad to be back on trusted and familiar territory. Critics have always agreed that the moor stands for the *terra incognita*, for uncharted territory, a place which has not been assimilated by civilization and the rules of human community. However, it is not only this well-known ballad image of the moor with all its connotations that needs closer scrutiny. More important is the way in which the reader's response to it is manipulated. There is nothing intrinsically evil about the moor, about wild, untamed nature. As we follow the boy, we do not find it difficult to understand how he grows anxious over unusual sounds, sounds emerging from the general silence. The narrator does not wait for the boy's first start, but declares in advance, and almost triumphantly, that everyone will experience fear on the moor. The poem begins and finishes with this unquestioned fact. Sounds and sensations which might otherwise be ignored suddenly become sinister or hostile. On that basis we enter the boy's mind with heightened, fearful expectations much as he has them himself. In the first stanza the tone and mood is set. The next four stanzas are similarly structured: we watch the child as he proceeds, then share the boy's physical perception of the scene and finally witness his attempts to make sense of what he perceives. The boy becomes increasingly vulnerable and frightened by the sights and sounds on the moor yet ironically, in attempting to interpret them, he conjures up still more frightening images. The sensory signals from the moor, which are predominantly aural, set off associations which accelerate his panic and also intensify in turn the hostility of these signals. Technically, the intensification is underpinned by the retarding last syllable of each stanza. The regular rhyming pattern with its nine-syllabic lines provides

a structured rhythm of an almost musical movement which is halted and released to create a sense of swift speed coupled with 'stumbling' effects. This effect is subtly orchestrated through the (dipodic) interplay of trochees and dactyls. Although these associations succinctly convey the terrified emotion of the boy, they are for the most part hardly a boy's. We may trace the appearance of the 'Spinnlenor' (a local version of the wicked, resentful and death-bringing female spinner who defies God's commandment not to work on Sunday, and is familiar to us from a fairytale like *Sleeping Beauty*) and the 'Geigemann' (an image from childhood folklore which represents either a harbinger, a personification or an allegory of death) to childhood folklore; they are images familiar to the child and readily invoked to explain the uncanny sounds. But even if we recognize the boy's book (the 'Fibel', line 9) as a token of the civilized territory of learning and reason, it is difficult to imagine him invoking the character of Margaret from the Faustian history or drama. At a time when schooling would have been in its infancy in the poet's homeland of Westphalia, the complex ideas of condemnation and death are unlikely trains of thought to be followed by a scared boy. They are not tools a child would choose to convey an emotion. It is, in short, a consciously adult narrator who seems to drift in and out of the child's experience. The boy is a mere carrier, a figure who allows the adult to re-enact an adult memory of a childhood experience. One might think of it as an experience (of fear) that has never gone away but one which the poet chooses to confine to childhood, in this case to put into the hand's of her child protagonist – and so to banish into a safe fictional past. And it is not just a matter of safe chronological distance; the fears are associated with a remote site, the moor. Interestingly, the moor itself is in this and in other treatments the home of the banished, of the dead, of outlaws and the hopes and fears which accompany them. In Droste-Hülshoff's novella *Die Judenbuche* [The Jew's Beech] we encounter a similar phenomenon. Here nature in its child-like innocence and harmlessness becomes the playground for evil and retribution. Clearly, for Droste-Hülshoff these are elemental traits of humanity which it is difficult to accommodate within the confines of 'civilisation' and which are consequently projected onto spaces outside civilization, the forest as much as the moor.

In order to emphasize the immediacy of this issue the narrator introduces the dread conjured up by the moor, but in fact projected onto

the moor, in the present tense: fear is a presence as is made clear in the description of the action from stanza 2 onwards. The boy who reaches safety thinks to himself that the terror is over – but only until he has to cross it again. The poem is focussed on the emotion, the sensation of terror and dread. The moor is in fact an embodiment of dread, and the description of it in poetic form provides an opportunity to arouse the same emotion in readers. The boy is chosen because his appearance heightens the sensation and emphasizes the helplessness of humans in the face of such emotions. But it is an unfeeling, even cruel use of the boy. Of course, Droste-Hülshoff never left in doubt her fascination with the 'süße[r] Schauer' [sweet shudder], with that which was 'schaurig-schön' [scary-sweet]. These aesthetic effects appear throughout her ballads and in her prose. A frail, frequently bed-ridden aristocrat she could produce perhaps unexpectedly terrifying images. Undoubtedly, this may have some compensatory function for a poet of (seemingly) fragile disposition: the creation of strong emotion by means of controlled use of her subject-matter. This could appear decadent, this creation of emotion for its own sake. There certainly seems to be little in the way of a moral agenda. We could contrast Goethe's *Erlkönig* [The Erlking]. Here we also follow a terrorized child whose pleas remain unanswered but this is offset by a cathartic final line, which reveals a profound sympathy with the dead child. The child's feelings, whilst conveyed in folkloristic imagery, are acknowledged as true and valid. The contrast is deceptive. In fact the boy in our poem is not simply created by the narrator to provide the poet with a disconcerting and vicarious emotional pleasure. In *Der Knabe im Moor*, the sensation of terror remains banished into childish recurrence, never to be taken seriously. The narrator will not save the boy: it is the 'Schutzengel' (line 38) who protects him. There is, perhaps, even a sense of spite in the narrator's deliberate cruelty, in subjecting reader and boy alike to sensations which can be activated at will. There is, however, a purpose behind this all. The poem can be read as a well-orchestrated attack on denial. The narrator's floating voice knows of the history and nature of the emotional response to the given scenario. He manipulates the reader through the apparent immediacy of the boy's sensations. That immediacy is in fact the adult's forced and mediated attempt to distance himself from the 'inner child' and further to indicate the inability of the grown-up to cope with these sensations without projecting them back into the safe distance of

childhood. The experience of nature can give space to the subconscious; here we meet retribution, a terror inspired by that which civilization has banished to the realm of the imagination and folklore. The narrator allows it to burst to the surface in what are inarticulate, but all the more powerful and evocative sounds and signs. The temporary and essentially Romantic resonance between boy and nature is also the point of identification for the reader. It explains the succinct emotional quality of the poem, but also betrays the alienated nature of the adult's identification.

The moor remains unconquered, an existential threat, for the boy will have to leave the shine of the homely lamp again, perhaps the next morning, and certainly when he leaves his family to make his own way. The consciousness of the terrifying side of life as something which is substantially of our own making, despite our best attempts to deny this or attribute it to some other cause, is at the centre of Droste-Hülshoff's work. In this poem, she documents not primarily a superstitious response to nature as we might expect from rural, early nineteenth-century Catholic Westphalia. In the voyeuristic and, to an extent, sadistic narratorial stance we can discover a modern attack on man's dislocated, fractured relationship with nature and with himself. For even today, when folklore has a lesser role in the expression of the subconscious and the imaginative, the reader still recognizes in the terror of this poem the conflict between man and his own nature, he understands the tendency for human, emotional reality to be marginalised. The realism of Droste-Hülshoff's texts is of a profound kind: the tangible surface is not everything, indeed it may not be what it seems to be. The moor is not just moor. Droste-Hülshoff's moor acts as a mirror of our hidden or denied selves and so presents a psychological as much as a physical landscape.

### Bibliographic Notes

Poem reproduced from: Annette von Droste-Hülshoff: *Sämtliche Gedichte*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1998, p. 68–70. Translated by Sascha H. Harris.



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